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AUTHOR Silcock, Anne: Sadler, D. Royce
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ABSTRACT

Both structured and free response questionnaires were given to 600 Australian children (100 each of 6-, 7-, and 8-year-old boys and girls) on perceptions of their parents. The free response questionnaire asked children to complete sentences beginning with the phrase "Mothers are" or the phrase "Fathers are." The structured questionnaire consisted of 37 questions to which the children answered either M(Mother) or F(Father), depending on which parent they associated with the question. Content analysis of the children's statements was based on 12 of the 33 categories developed by Livesley and Bromley. Large discrepancies were found between the results for the two questionnaires. In particular, the structured data overemphasized the importance of negative characteristics which did not appear to be salient in the free response data. Other findings were: Two of the 15 categories, Positive Evaluation and General Personality Attributes, accounted for more than half of all the children's responses. Four categories which describe more peripheral aspects of persons--Social Roles, Appearance, Physical Condition, and Effect Upon and Relations With Others--accounted for 30% of the total responses. Results are also reported on sex differences and age differences in perception of fathers and of mothers. It was concluded that the free response technique has more validity as a measure of parent perception. (Author/SS)

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YOUNG CHILDREN'S DIFFERENTIAL PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PARENTS

by

Anne Silcock and D. Royce Sadler

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Young Children's Differential Perceptions of their Parents

Anne Silcock and D. Royce Sadler
Department of Education
University of Queensland, Australia.

1. *INTRODUCTION*

This paper addresses itself to the question "How do young children perceive their parents?" It reports the findings of one section of an investigation of perception of parents and of self involving 600 children aged 6-8 years in Brisbane, Australia.

The experience of working with university students studying Developmental Psychology and Early Childhood Education, together with discussions with parents and children have highlighted apparent discrepancies between research findings based on structured questionnaires, rating scales and interviews as measures of parent perception and naturalistic studies of children and their spontaneous comments during observation. Accordingly, this study attempted to tap young children's parent perceptions from a free response as well as a structured approach. Accurate information on how children perceive their parents is essential for an understanding of the process of socialization and of children's social and personal development.

Twenty five years ago a study of the relationship between perceived parental attitudes and children's ego structure carried out by Ausubel et al., (1954) revealed that children's ego structure is affected by children's perceptions of parent behaviours, rather than by the behaviour as an objective environmental event. Serot and Teevan (1961) stated that both theory and research into parent-child relationships have failed to recognise that "the child reacts to his perception of the situation and not directly to the situation itself." (p.377) In another study, Dubin and Dubin (1965) pointed out that "there has been widespread failure even to realise that it is not only parent behavior to which the child responds but also his perception of parent behavior." (p.809) They noted a tendency to assume that children respond uniformly to parental child-rearing practices. This ignores the possibility that parental behaviour may be interpreted differently by parents and by children and that what the child does and what he becomes is in response to his perception of parent behaviour.

The next development of relevance to this research was Bell's (1968) study on a reinterpretation of the direction of effects in studies of socialization. He said that while "it seems eminently plausible to visualize the human parent as the vehicle for the transmission of culture

and the infant as simply the object of an acculturation process" (p.81) the implied unidirectional effect from parent to child disregards research which suggests that the characteristics of infants and children evoke different behaviour in the same adult. It fails to consider that specific acts of maternal caregiving could be accounted for more satisfactorily by the behaviour of the infant rather than by the mother's general attitude towards child rearing.

Bell postulated that, instead of fixed techniques for socializing children, parents have a repertoire of actions, any one of which may accomplish an objective. The activation of particular elements in the mother's repertoire requires both cultural pressures and stimulation from the child. He theorised that there are hierarchies of actions and that different children induce responses from different levels of these hierarchies. The child then reinforces, or fails to reinforce, the parent behaviours which he/she evokes.

Brazelton (1978) also emphasised the power of newborn infants in shaping their mothers behaviours. He said: "the particular kind of infant with which she is faced in the neonatal period must determine which mothering reactions she will draw from her repertoire" (p.106)

In his 1971 paper, Bell further developed the notion of the child as a participant in a social system, stimulating as well as being stimulated. In the same year Harper (1971) reviewed the effects of mammalian offspring on their caretakers and suggested the application of the same behaviour analysis to parent-offspring relations in man. Osofsky (1971), using a structured laboratory situation, showed that parental behaviour differed in response to different child behaviours and Berberich (1971) demonstrated that children's responses shape the teaching behaviour of adults.

More recently Bates (1975) and Cantor and Gelfand (1977) have shown the significant effects of imitation and responsiveness in children upon adult behaviour. Cantor and Gelfand state: "The present results portray the child as one who helps to create his social world. A child who fails to attend to and converse with adults is seen by the adults as less socially attractive and even as less intelligent than the pleasant, sociable child" (p.237).

It was against such a background of stimulating ideas that the present research was undertaken.

2. *THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK*

The study of children's perception of their parents has elements in common with clinical psychology and the concept of identification, it shares an area of overlap with both cognitive development and personality theory. However the twin psychological areas of Attribution Theory as expounded by Jones, et al. (1971) and De Charms (1968), and Person Perception as developed by Livesley and Bromley (1973), Newcomb, Turner and Converse (1966) and Bruner and Tagiuri (1954) appear to provide the most useful umbrella. Both have their roots in Heider's (1958) theoretical writings in the psychology of interpersonal relations and Festinger's (1957) theory of social comparison processes. Kelley has attempted to formulate a theoretical framework for Attribution Theory while Person Perception defines an area of empirical investigation. They share a perspective with a strong practical orientation and emphasise the type of methodology that elicits free and unrestricted descriptions of real people in real situations in an attempt to understand relationships between and attribute causes to human behaviours.

For Jones et al. (1971), "attribution theory deals with the rules the average individual uses in attempting to infer the causes of observed behavior." Their empirical studies into the basic processes involved in perceiving the self, other persons, and the settings in which people function deal with areas of behaviour such as success and failure and the direction and intensity of emotion. Livesley and Bromley (1973) define person perception as "how we 'perceive' or 'cognize' other persons - their intentions, attitudes, traits, emotions, ideas, abilities and purposes, as well as their overt behavioural and physical characteristics." (p.1) They assert that people "assimilate a wide range of perceptual data about people into reasonably valid and stable schemata which have the function of initiating and guiding (their) responses in relation to them" (p.3). Their research studies focussed on the developmental psychology of person perception through the investigation of the simpler concepts and organisation of children's and adolescents' ideas about people. It is in this latter area that the present research makes a contribution.

Yarrow and Campbell (1963) suggest that "children appraise others in interactional terms, along lines of personal significance" (p.69). The impressions that children form of "significant others" especially of parents and peers, are likely to establish patterns for characteristic styles of interacting with people in the wider social environment. Considering the importance of these perceptions it is surprising, as Livesley and Bromley point out "that there has been no systematic analysis of children's concepts

of human behaviour and personality comparable to the study of their concepts of the physical world or of space, number and causality" (p.53). They suggest that the developmental psychology of Piaget and Werner and the cognitive psychology of Bruner could provide a general conceptual orientation for research into the growth of children's understanding of people.

3. *INSTRUMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS*

Beach and Wertheimer (1961) propose a "free response" approach to the study of person cognition. In experiments in person perception subjects are typically asked to make judgements about a particular person in a given situation using fixed scales which require them to make judgements on dimensions that they would not ordinarily use. They question interpretations based on dimensions whose meaning and salience may be unclear, atypical or non-existent to the subject. They dispute the generalizability of results from studies which use artificial or synthetic stimuli presented by means of film, recordings, photographs, drawings, stories, lists of adjectives and so on, to the perception of real live people.

Instead, they advocate the practice of designating a specific class of people, asking subjects to choose some-one they know who fits this class and to describe the chosen person using any terms or dimensions they wish. The relative frequency of use of different dimensions by a given subject reflects their relative salience. The free response data are content analyzed in an attempt to discover relationships.

They also suggest that a subject's responses on inappropriate dimensions are based on stereotypes, while judgements made on dimensions considered appropriate are more specific to the person being judged. Beach and Wertheimer's recommendation is that fixed scale research should be preceded by free response/content analysis studies to aid in decisions as to which scales or dimensions are appropriate for the subjects, the people, and the situation involved.

Willems and Willems (1965) discussed the comparative validity of data yielded by three different methods: standardised individual interviews, card-sorts, and check lists. Their conclusion was that coded interview data represented a free, unaided recall of the desired material, the card sort data a stimulated forced choice recall with a sorting of the given items and the check list data a stimulated forced choice recall with a simple yes/no marking of items.

A consistent tendency was found for the coded interview data to provide the most valid empirical indication of their objective, i.e. forces towards participation in behaviour settings. As this method was time consuming and required by far the most work, a strong negative relationship was found between the ease of gathering and the validity of the data. They state "If one postulates a real or valid set of responses, unique to the individual subject, then the coded interview method provides the most freedom for subjects to respond in terms of their own sets of experiences. In the card-sort and check list methods, the response sample was pre-arranged, abstracted and restricted" (p.70).

In reviewing research into children's perceptions of their parents, Livesley and Bromley (1973) drew attention to the somewhat artificial nature of the methods used. Rating scales, structured questions and structured response alternatives to pictorial stimuli, they said, place severe constraints upon the child's responses.

They believe that research into the area of person perception has been retarded by highly structured and tightly controlled laboratory experiments which require subjects to form judgements using dimensions they do not normally use. "Subjects have rarely been provided with relatively unstructured situations and allowed to select the information they think relevant, or to respond in their usual manner. Such a naturalistic approach may seem to run counter to current attitudes and methods in psychology, but in the absence of developed theories about the way we perceive and understand others, it is an obvious approach and a legitimate one from a philosophy of science point of view. The use of fairly natural and unstructured situations minimises the risk of our being misled by false assumptions or experimental artefacts and it allows us to identify the key variables which can be studied subsequently under more closely controlled conditions" (p.67).

Livesley and Bromley were confronted by three research problems in the collection of free descriptive data from representative samples of subjects.

(a) how to systematically observe and record the way children perceive and conceptualise people,

(b) how to develop procedures for classifying and systematizing both the contents and the organisation of these impressions, and

(c) how to explain any developmental changes that are revealed.

They selected content analysis as "the technique most free from methodological preconceptions, and the one most likely to reveal the full range of possibilities for future investigation" (p.11). Substantial use was made of content analysis in the present study.

4. *METHODOLOGY*

4.1 Subjects

Six hundred children (100 each of 6, 7, and 8 year old boys and girls) attending three Brisbane Primary Schools drawing children from lower, middle and upper-middle class backgrounds served as subjects. (N=600)

4.2 Instrumentation and Procedure

A free response task and a structured questionnaire on parent perception were administered to subjects in their classrooms. Teachers were present and assisted, if required, with spelling. The free response task, on the first page, consisted of six, well-spaced two word phrases. Three of these read "Mothers are" and three read "Fathers are". Children were asked to complete each of the six sentences. They were asked to write given name, age, and school in the space provided.

The structured questionnaire consisted of 37 questions. Subjects were asked to write either M (Mother) or F (Father) against each item according to which parent the question made them think of. Meanings of words were given when requested.

4.3 Content Analysis

Free Response Task and Structured Questionnaire Data

In their content analysis, Livesley and Bromley (1975) differentiated between Central and Peripheral statements. Central statements are more abstract and generalized and include personality characteristics and behavioural consistencies. Peripheral statements refer to external qualities such as appearance, skills, social roles and social relationships.

Statements were rated as either Central or Peripheral using these criteria. They were then classified into the categories defined by Livesley and Bromley, using the twelve of their thirty-three categories which appeared to be appropriate to the data.

Three categories were subdivided. Items categorised as C10, Specific Behavioural Consistencies or C20 Evaluations were coded as positive or negative. Items in category P27 Mutual Interaction were allocated to the category P27(b) if they related specifically to parental caregiving. Accordingly fifteen categories were used to encode childrens perceptions of their parents. Items appropriate to six of the above categories were classified as Central and the remaining nine as Peripheral statements.

4.4 Reliability

The usefulness of a set of categories depends upon their comprehensiveness and on the extent to which different coders, and a single coder at different points in time, can consistently assign statements to categories. Inter-coder reliability was assessed by comparing three coders' categorisations of 360 responses selected by taking 10 response sheets chosen at random from each of the 6 age/sex strata, and coding each of the 6 responses (3 for father, 3 for mother) from each child. The three judges were the two principal investigators and one graduate research assistant. The agreement between the first author and the research assistant was 80%, and between the two investigators 72%. This represents a high level of agreement between judges.

Two separate codings of the 360 statements by the first author separated by some 8 weeks resulted in 79% agreement. These results indicate that the coding of open responses can be carried out with adequate reliability. An improvement could be expected in future research when the Livesley and Bromley categories are made more operational in terms of the responses from young children, and the judges have had more coding experience.

4.5 Relative Validity of Instruments Used

In section 3, it is argued that open responses are likely to be epistemologically more in harmony with children's perceptions of their parents than are responses to structured questionnaires. The exception is of course the case when the structured instrument evolves from earlier open responses (so that it taps the characteristics the children feel are salient) and is couched in words familiar to and understood by the children themselves. Obviously, a structured instrument must make certain assumptions about child vocabulary and it appears that, for young children whose vocabulary is naturally limited, the terms used must have simplicity and contemporaneity. The structured instrument used in this study now appears to us to have limited validity for a number of technical reasons. These will be examined one by one.

(i) Unfamiliar characteristics of words

The descriptive terms used in the structured questionnaire were taken directly from the literature. As it turned out, some terms used were relatively unfamiliar to the children in the Brisbane sample: in particular words such as "rouses", "spoils" and "frowns" had to have their meanings explained. While in common use a generation or two ago, the term 'rouse" is pretty uncommon in Australian society, even among adults. The unfamiliarity can, in principle at least, be overcome by proper explanation.

Quite another issue is whether a child would ordinarily think of it's mother or father in terms of the concept explained. There are thus clearly two problems: unfamiliarity of the term used as descriptor, and the use of that descriptor as a parent attribute. Imagine the puzzled response from an adult of whom is asked the question: "Who thinks irregularly, your mother or your father?" One does not normally use a term such as "thinking irregularly" about anybody (it is, in any case, ambiguous); to be asked to nominate father or mother in response is probably absurd.

Granted that some of the structured items were unfamiliar or irrelevant to children in one way or another, the children were nevertheless required to respond. It is speculated that children, having never perceived their own parents in the ways suggested in the structured instrument, may respond not with perceptions about mother or father but with their perceptions of culture-stereotypic mother-father roles.

(ii) Ipsative measures

Clearly, when the response is restricted to either-or, serious limitations are placed on the patterning of outcomes. For example, if father receives a high score on one set of items, mother must receive a low score on the same set. An alternative way of stating the problem is this: for every choice of father, the choice of mother must be rejected.

(iii) Unit of Measurement

A final distortion is that produced by dichotomisation in the unit of measurement. The differential between perception of father and mother must inevitably be recorded as one unit, even if the child's perception of his parents are ambivalent.

4.6 Mismatch

The incongruence between structured-item data and free-response data is shown graphically in Figure 1. Four discrepancies are glaring. Category C20+ was not represented at all in the structured item, yet more than one third of the children's free responses were classified here. Almost as dramatic were categories C10- and P24 while the discrepancy for C9, though smaller, was still notable. Details of these discrepancies are given in Section 5.

In the early stages of data analysis, such discrepancies were not anticipated. By historical accident, the structured data were analysed first, but the researchers are now convinced that these data are much less useful than at first thought, and only a brief summary of the results are given here. It is our belief that the structured data grossly

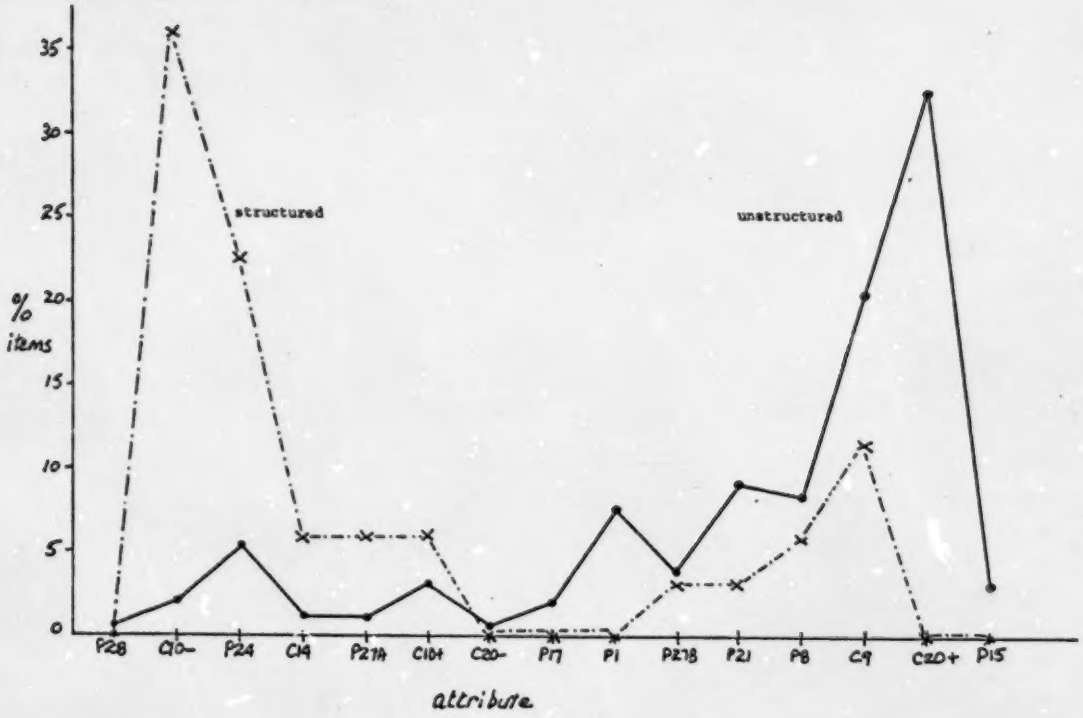

Figure 1. Proportions of responses in each of the 15 categories used in analysing the structured and unstructured data.

overemphasise the importance of characteristics (particularly negative ones) not seen as relevant or salient by the children. The unstructured data are, we believe, closer to the children's real perceptions, even though young children do tend to make frequent use of somewhat vague descriptors such as "good" and "nice".

All research with young children where verbalisation is heavily involved in data acquisition is bedevilled by the restrictions of limited vocabulary. Whether apparent shifts in perception and conceptualization with increasing age are a function of more sophisticated powers of verbalization remains to be researched. In the present study we are forced into making a sizable assumption: that children's perceptions are roughly co-extensive with what the children can themselves articulate or can at least recognise in articulated form.

All in all, we put our money on the unstructured data; most of the findings dealt with in this paper are based on the free responses of the children.

5. *DISCUSSION OF RESULTS*

5.1 Use of Content Categories & Central/Peripheral Statements

Two of the fifteen categories, Positive Evaluation (C20+) e.g. "good" and "nice" and General Personality Attributes (C9) e.g. "helpful" and "kind" accounted for more than half (52.4%) of the 3600 responses of the 600 subjects. These descriptions, therefore occurred most frequently in the perceptions and conceptualisations of parents by 6, 7 and 8 year old Australian children. They are classified as psychological or central statements by Livesley and Bromley as opposed to non-psychological or peripheral statements, like physical descriptions and social interactions. They state: "The central versus peripheral contrast, is analogous to that of 'abstract versus concrete' in cognitive psychology and seems to be associated with levels of conceptual competence in interpersonal relationships". (p.106) They believe that the ability to use central terms to describe people is advantageous because effective and sensitive social interaction depends upon the ability to discern regularities which underlie specific diverse behavioural acts, and to take situational effects into account when arriving at expectations about an individual's actions.

Four peripheral categories - Social Roles (P21) which was broadened to include functional parental roles such as "house keeping" duties, Appearance (P1) Physical Condition (P8) and Effect upon and Relations with Others (P24) together accounted for 30% of the total responses. In the parent perceptions of these 6-8 year olds they were clearly of lesser significance than the main central categories C20+ and C9 described above. With occasional variations, these four peripheral categories occupied the same relative position in perceptions of fathers and of mothers, by boys and by girls at each age. The exceptions were the 8 year old boys who recorded somewhat greater diversity of response for mothers and the 7 year old girls who referred to the social roles of mothers more frequently than any other group. Nine of the fifteen content categories were used only infrequently. Except for the two negative ones these will not be dealt with in this paper.

5.2 Comparison of Free Response and Structured Questionnaire Data

Negative Behavioural Consistencies (C10-) and Negative Evaluation (C20-), accounted for 2.1% and for 0.7% respectively of the total free response data. Thus negative perceptions of parents were rarely expressed by subjects. In strong contrast C10- was the most frequently used category in responses to the structured questionnaire, accounting for 36% of the

total responses. Structured questionnaires and similar instruments which are customarily used to measure young childrens perceptions of parents frequently present an abundance of items with negative connotations such as "Who punishes you?" "Who are you scared of more?" "Who gets mad?" and "Who spanks you?" Accordingly, children are forced to make negative evaluations of one or the other parent in responding to these items. Responses with negative affect seldom occurred in the free response situation where the children were allowed to express their own perceptions in their own words without coercion from the form of the testing instrument.

5.3 Perceptions of Fathers

Sex Differences

About 45% of the perceptions of fathers by boys and by girls were associated with the two major categories. Boys used Positive Evaluation and girls used Personality Attributes somewhat more often than did the opposite sex. Negative evaluations of fathers were very infrequent, accounting for about 5% of the boys' and 2% of the girls' responses.

Thus both boys and girls perceive fathers predominantly in terms of Positive Evaluation using words such as "good", "nice", "terrific", "special" and "important" and as having Personality Attributes such as "kind", "loving", "helpful", "understanding" and "generous". A small number of boys and less than half as many girls perceived fathers as "angry", "rough" or "cranky".

Age Differences - Boys

Table 1 shows the percentages of responses of 6, 7 & 8 year old boys in the two major categories.

Categories	6yr	7yr	8yr
C 20+	38.0	28.7	24.0
C 9	6.0	17.3	22.3
	44.0	46.0	46.3

N = 100 boys at each age

Table 1: Percentages of boys of different ages responding with Positive Evaluations (C20+) and Personality Attributes (C9) about their fathers.

Descriptions of fathers predominantly in terms of evaluations such as "good" and "fantastic" decreased with age while the application of personality attributes such as "trustworthy" and "generous" increased dramatically between 6 and 7 years and still further by age 8.

This probably reflects the increased cognitive sophistication of concrete operational children relative to six year olds. Livesley and Bromley found that the most significant increase in the use of central statements occurred between 7.10 and 8.10 years. This sample of 300 Australian boys aged 6-8 years recorded highly similar usage of central statements, except for the dramatic increase in the frequency of use of concepts which describe personality attributes noted above.

The rarely occurring negative comments were found least often with 7 year olds and most often with 8 year old boys.

Age Differences - Girls

As with boy subjects, the two major categories accounted for nearly half of the responses at all age levels. Table 2 shows an inverse relationships in the use of the two major categories at 6, 7 and 8 years, similar to the effect for boys. Again, 7 year old subjects show a dramatic increase in the use of personality attribute terms compared with 6 year olds.

Categories	6yr	7yr	8yr
C 20+	35.0	27.7	21.0
C 9	7.0	19.0	28.3
	42.0	46.7	49.3

N = 100 girls at each age

Table 2: Percentages of girls of different ages responding with Positive Evaluations (C20+) and Personality Attributes (C9) about their Fathers.

However, for girls, there is a further dramatic increase in the ability to conceptualise between 7 and 8 years. In fact, the 8 year old girls recorded a somewhat higher percentage of central statements and considerably higher usage of personality attribute terms than the other five groups of subjects, reflecting perhaps the reported verbal superiority of girls.

Negative responses were almost non-existent amongst 6 and 7 year old girls whilst 8 year old girls recorded the same amount (5%) of negative appraisal of fathers as did 8 year old boys, an interesting finding which suggests that age of subjects and not sex, may be the relevant variable here.

5.4 Perceptions of Mothers

Sex Differences

Nearly 60% of the responses of boys and girls fitted into the two major content categories, a considerably higher figure than occurred in their perceptions of fathers. Again boys used Positive Evaluation and girls used Personality Attributes more frequently than did the opposite sex. No sex differences were found in the use of negative responses. It is notable that fewer than 1% of boys and girls perceptions of mothers expressed negative affect.

Thus boys and girls perceive mothers, more often than not as "nice", "good", "terrific" and "special" and as possessing personality attributes such as "helpful", "kind", "gentle" and "soft-hearted". Negative evaluations of mother by boys and girls were almost non-existent, suggesting generally harmonious relations between these young children and mothers.

Age Differences - Boys

Categories	6yr	7yr	8yr
C20+	48.3	37.4	31.7
C 9	6.3	23.3	32.0
	54.6	60.7	63.7

N = 100 boys at each age

Table 3: Percentages of boys of different ages responding with Positive Evaluations (C20+) and Personality Attributes (C9) about their mothers.

At each age central statements (Table 3) accounted for more than half the responses, rising to 63.7% at age 8. Again there is an inverse relationship between the frequency of use of Positive Evaluation and Personality Attribute terms, with a striking increase in the later at age 7 and a further gain at 8 years. Boys, like girls, appear to function at a more sophisticated cognitive level at 7 years, compared with 6 years. In boys perceptions of mothers words like "good" seem to be characteristic of 6 year olds and greater diversity, e.g. "wonderful", "special" of the older boys. One 8 year old described mothers as "sweethearts" and another said they were "hearers and listeners". Negative evaluations of mothers were almost non-existent at each age.

Age Differences - Girls

Categories	6yr	7yr	8yr
C20 +	43.3	29.0	24.7
C 9	12.7	25.0	43.0
	56.0	54.0	67.7

N = 100 girls at each age

Table 4: Percentages of girls of different ages responding with Positive Evaluations (C20+) and Personality Attributes (C9) about their mothers.

The new familiar pattern of parent perception was found in girls' perceptions of mothers. (Table 4) The two major content categories accounted for more than half of the responses and there was an inverse relationship between the frequency and use of the categories with increasing age, highlighted by dramatic increases in the use of Personality Attribute terms at age 7 and again at 8 years. The most significant finding was the high proportion of central statements used by 8 year old girls which exceeded that of any other group. A remarkable 43% of their 300 descriptions of mothers dealt with personality attributes which were usually expressed in phrases rather than in single words.

Evidence from the present study offers strong support for Brierley's (1966) findings on the use of personality constructs in children's descriptions of other people. Her classification of the responses of 270 children aged 7, 10 and 13 years into six main categories revealed that there were marked age differences in the number of personality constructs employed. She said: "It is only in the oldest age group that these occur at all frequently, and then in girls more than in boys" (p.73) As our oldest girls are only one year older than Brierley's youngest ones, their performance is remarkable.

A further noteworthy result was the high use of personality attributes by 6 year old girls in their perceptions of mothers. For them, this category ranked second in frequency of use whereas it was fifth in 6 year old boys descriptions of mothers and sixth in both 6 year old boys and 6 year old girls perceptions of fathers. Perhaps 6 year old girls are more dependent upon their mothers than are the other groups. As with boys, negative evaluations of mothers were exceedingly infrequent.

5.5 Differential Perceptions of Parents on two major Categories

Positive Evaluation (C 20+)

One third of the 3600 perceptions of parents fell within the Positive Evaluation content category. Fig. 2 shows the differential responses to

fathers and to mothers on this variable. For both sexes, at each age level more items such as "good", "fantastic" and "wonderful" were directed to mothers than to fathers. This phenomenon was most marked for 6 year old subjects and least apparent at age 7, especially for girls. Dubin and Dubin's (1965) review of research into children's social perceptions revealed that over a wide range of ages, mother is preferred to father. Evidence from the greater percentage of positive evaluation and the small percentage of negative evaluation directed towards mothers as compared with fathers in this study tends to support these earlier investigations.

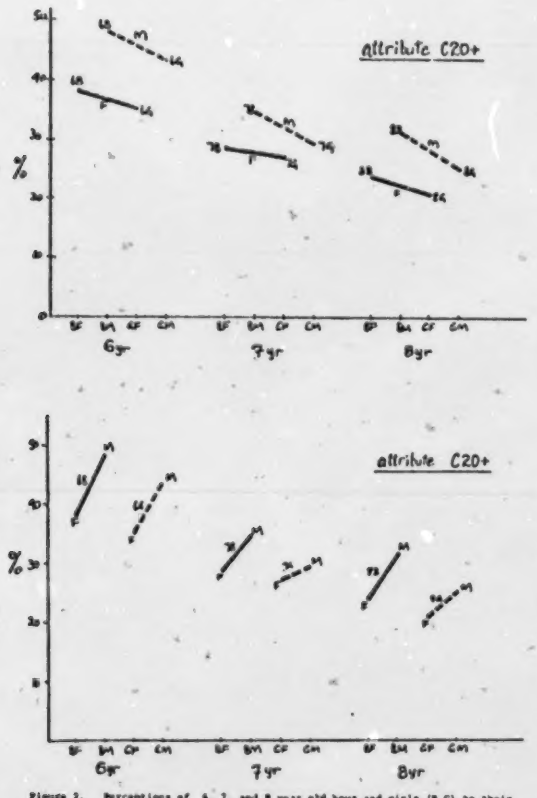

Figure 2. Perceptions of 6, 7, and 8 year old boys and girls (B,G) to their fathers and mothers (F,M) on category C20+, Positive Evaluations.

Using sentences beginning "My father ..." and "My mother ..." to evoke attitudes towards parents Harris and Tseng (1957) found more favourable attitudes to mothers than to fathers amongst a large sample of 9 year old children and a sharp drop in favourableness between ages 9 and 10 which remained relatively unchanged until late high school years. They attributed this to a shift away from "the young child's uncritical fondness for parents to a more objective judgement". (p.408) It would be interesting to investigate this phenomenon twenty years later.

Hawkes, Burchinal & Gardner (1957) examined the views of 750 pre-adolescents (11 year olds) to ascertain their relationships with their parents. They found that both parents were rated favourably by all the children and that mothers were uniformly rated more favourably than fathers, especially by the girls. Droppleman & Schaefer (1963) used a group of scales to measure components of love, nurturance and affection. They found that mothers were rated significantly higher than fathers by the 165 boys and girls aged 12-14 years. In the present study the discrepancy between positive evaluations of fathers and mothers was greatest for boys.

Boys of every age group used a higher percentage of Positive Evaluation terms for mothers, than for fathers. Perhaps, not surprisingly, 6 year old boys registered the greatest disparity in this regard. However, both 7 and 8 year old boys made relatively higher usage of this content category for mothers than for fathers, an interesting finding, if father is assumed to be the major identificand for 7 and 8 year old boys, the source of derived status and the parent with whom they share ever increasing interests and concerns appropriate to their common sex role.

Seven year old girls discriminated least of all between mothers and fathers on this dimension. Interestingly, they also recorded particularly low levels of negative evaluation for both parents. The descriptions of 8 year old girls also revealed a smaller disparity between mothers and fathers on the positive evaluation category.

The exceedingly high occurrence of words denoting Positive Evaluation in the responses of 6 year olds (averaging 42% of total responses) can be accounted for in part, by the frequency with which they responded with "nice" and "godd" when compared with the older subjects. Whilst these terms clearly imply positive evaluations of parents they are perhaps "low-level" concepts which feature prominently in the younger child's vocabulary. It is apparent from the data that the older subjects have a much wider variety of concepts available for selection and their descriptions of parents are generally more subtle and individualised. However 6 year olds undoubtedly use considerably more terms of positive evaluation for mothers than do 7 and 8 year olds, reflecting, perhaps, their greater dependence upon their mothers.

Personality Attributes (C9)

Figure 3 shows the differential perceptions of fathers and mothers for this content category. For all groups of subjects, except for 6 year old boys, there is a marked discrepancy between perceptions of parents, with mothers more often being referred to in terms of Personality Attributes.

The greatest discrepancy occurred with 8 year old girls; 28% of their responses to fathers, and 43% to mothers were in this category. Perhaps this reflects an increased acceptance of appropriate sex role characteristics and closer identification with the same sex parent.

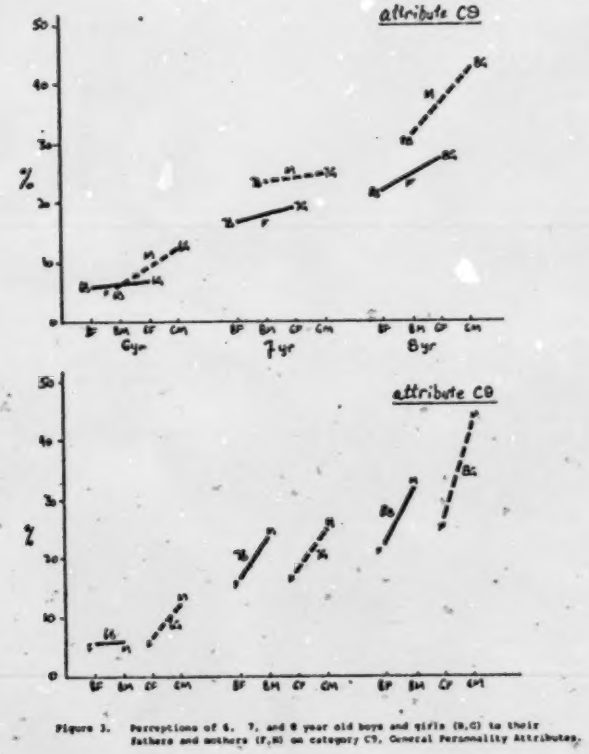

Figure 3. Perceptions of 6, 7, and 8 year old boys and girls (B,G) to their fathers and mothers (F,M) on category C9, General Personality Attributes.

The two categories Positive Evaluation and Personality Attributes reflect the core of Livesley & Bromley's central or psychological statements. Although boys and girls recorded the same percentage in the usage of these categories, words denoting Positive Evaluation and Personality Attributes accounted for 46% of the responses to fathers and 59% of those to mothers. Does the use of more abstract and generalised terms referring to inner, psychological qualities to describe mothers suggest their greater salience for children in the 6-8 years age range? Are children more aware of the person underlying the role functioning of mothers than they are of fathers as individuals?

Livesley & Bromley found that although a greater number of central statements were used to describe males than females, those used to describe females constituted a higher proportion of the total number of statements

(41% against 39%). A much greater discrepancy occurred in this study where the males and females described were fathers and mothers.

5.6 Differential Perceptions of Parents on Four Minor Content Categories

Social Roles (P21)

Social Roles ranked third in frequency of usage of the 15 categories by all subjects. It relates to group and organisational membership and occupational roles, and was extended in the present study to include family and parental roles such as "husband" and functional aspects of these such as "cooking the meals."

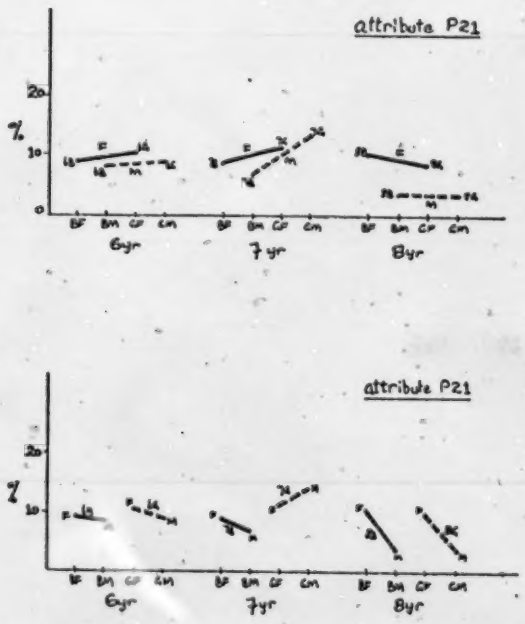

Figure 4. Perceptions of 6, 7, and 8 year old boys and girls (B,G) to their fathers and mothers (F,M) on category P21, Social Roles.

As shown in Figure 4 fathers, rather than mothers, tended to be designated by social roles, e.g. "men who work for money". The discrepancy was smallest at age 6 and became more pronounced with increasing age. Seven year old girls used this category more frequently than any other group, and the divergence between the sexes was greatest for 8 year old boys. Because Social Roles accounted for less than 9% of the data, vocational and family roles were not investigated separately.

Physical Condition (P8)

Peripheral statements describing health, physical fitness and strength characterize this category. Responses which described fathers as "grown up boys" and mothers as "sweet ladies" or "human beings" were also coded under Physical Condition. This category accounted for 7% of the data, marginally less than Physical Appearance (P1).

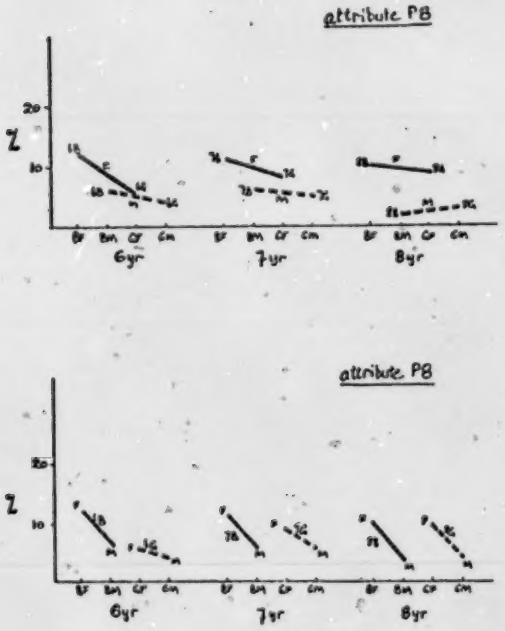

Figure 5. Perceptions of 6, 7, and 8 year old boys and girls (B.G.) to their fathers and mothers (F.M) on category P8, Physical Condition.

As seen in Figure 5, it did, however, differentiate between perceptions of fathers and mothers for all groups except the youngest girls. With increasing age of subjects particular aspects of physical condition e.g. "strong" were used with greater frequency to describe fathers, with 8 year old boys using these statements for fathers twice as often as for mothers.

Appearance (P1)

This category was used somewhat more often to describe mothers than fathers by subjects of each age, with the greatest difference shown by 8 year old boys. Thus while fathers were described as "handsome" and occasionally as "pretty" (and by a 7 year old boy as "hairy" and an 8 year

old boy as "white, brown and black") mother's appearance was more often alluded to, generally by terms such as "pretty" or "beautiful" (or "butterful"!). As seen in P1 above, fathers rather than mothers, were more often described in terms of strength and health.

Effect upon and Relations with Others (P24)

Responses in this category did not discriminate between fathers and mothers, except for 6 year old boys where mothers scored somewhat higher than fathers.

Negative Categories - Negative Behavioural Consistencies (C10-) and Negative Evaluation (C20-)

Summing the two negative categories revealed that about 5% of boys' responses to fathers were negative as were about 2.5% to mothers. About 2.5% of girls' descriptions of fathers and 1.5% of their responses to mothers were negative. Although the proportions of negative responses were very small, the highest amount was directed by boys to fathers, and the lowest amount by girls to mothers.

Of the total expression of negative feeling by boys, nearly half came from 8 year olds and one third was expressed by 8 year olds towards fathers. Girls recorded about half the amount of negative affect that boys registered. Two thirds of this originated with 8 year old girls and nearly half of the negative feelings of girls was directed by 8 year olds towards fathers. Thus much of the negative feelings recorded by 6-8 year olds took the form of criticisms of fathers by the oldest boys and girls. Maybe fathers, rather than mothers, tend to frustrate their 8 year old children as they become increasingly peer-oriented.

Research findings regarding children's expressions of negative attitudes to parents are somewhat equivocal. Gardner (1947) found that fathers were criticised more than mothers, and Du Valle (1937), and Goldin (1969) found that more positive attitudes are expressed about mothers than about fathers. Harris and Tseng (1957) in a study of 3000 students from lower primary through high school found that the small proportion of boys showing negative attitudes towards parents decreased steadily through childhood and adolescence, while the correspondingly small proportion of girls showing negative attitudes increased steadily over these years. Emmerick (1961) found that girls perceived the mother as somewhat more positive than the father, whereas boys perceived the converse.

Kagan, Hosken and Watson's (1961) study of children's symbolic conceptualization of parents (using pairs of picture stimuli which differed on eleven dimensions) revealed that children were reluctant to assign "bad" characteristics to either parent.

6. *CONCLUSION*

The most significant finding of this study was the great disparity between the perceptions of parents, as revealed by the Free Response technique and the Structured Questionnaire. Using the free response method resulted in sizable differential perceptions of parents on only two of the fifteen categories employed. Negative perceptions of parents were infrequent.

In contrast, researchers who rely upon the latter and similar structured instruments, this "more popular procedure of forcing the child to pick between father and mother" (Kagan et al., 1961) customarily find that children view fathers as more punitive and as a more frequent source of power, threat and fear arousal, whilst mothers are seen as friendly, and nurturant (Kagan, 1956, Kagan & Lemkin, 1960). The authors believe that the free response technique has more validity as a measure of parent perception.

The overwhelmingly positive response to parents by these 6-8 year old children suggests that the family is still their primary source of security and satisfaction and the centre of their world.

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